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Editorial: “Beyond the ‘Task at Hand’: Finding Purpose and Voice in Academic Writing”

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The Teaching Effectiveness Program is twenty-five years old this academic year; I’m its new director—only the second in its history. TEP supports the University’s teachers “across rank and discipline, building an imaginative, resourceful, and connected campus-wide teaching culture,” according to our mission statement. To do this work, TEP, in my view, needs to have regular conversations with students. What defines a UO education in their view? What distinguishes a great general education course from one that, every moment of every class, feels like a “requirement?” What were the most important things they learned here? When did they transition from feeling like students to feeling like writers, scholars, researchers, artists, and teachers in their own right?

Recently, the editorial board of the *Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal* took the time to talk with me about these issues. I asked what they look for in papers they opt to publish and what kinds of teaching practices have been most influential to them as writers. Their answers tell us something not only about the work that fills the pages to come, but also about the promise of a UO education. The editors seek writing that pushes past the “task at hand”—one assignment for one reader for one course; instead, the editors consider the best writers those who attempt to say why their work matters to a discipline, to a segment of society, to a wider “we,” or even to the writer personally. One of the editors—a humanist—mentioned that she read a biology paper expecting to be a bit bored, but found herself hooked: “It wasn’t just ‘here’s what I found’... it was a wonderful argument about why this matters.”

They praised student writers who ask themselves, “Why am I learning this? Is there an expansiveness to this issue that I can explore?” And they praised professors who challenge students by saying, “Here’s what we’ve learned—what do *you* want to do with it?”

The group emphasized that theirs is a teaching journal—every writer gets two full sets of comments from editors, one in a similar field, one in a completely different one: a practice the board is proud of and to which they’re committed. Much of that feedback is about pushing students to articulate the “so what?” latent in their work—encouraging them to explore the implications of their topics and have confidence that they can make claims that matter

The board members struck me as impressive peer teachers with a clear lesson for student writers: have courage; pursue your intellectual interests; claim them as meaningful; and share them with others, whose interest and curiosity you have the power to ignite in turn. I hope that

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every UO undergraduate can point to a piece of work that fulfills that promise—the examples here, and the work of peer editors to bring them before us, give us a glimpse of the best of UO's teaching and learning culture.